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A TWELFTH-CENTURY BRONZE

THE extreme rarity of objects in metal which have survived from the Middle Ages gives to the little bronze altar cross or reliquary base,¹ now on exhibition in the Room of Recent Accessions, an unusual interest and value.

It was cast in bronze, chased and gilded. Triangular in form, it consists of three large conventionalized leaves, radiating from a circular stem, the latter hollowed to receive the altar cross or whatever the base was intended to carry. The leaves support angels with wings outspread, seated, holding open books on their knees. The wings, forming a triangle, touch each other, and their tips rest upon small spheres, the latter constituting a terminal motif for three smaller leaves, also conventionalized, projecting between the larger ones. The whole is supported upon the shoulders of three dragons, whose heads rest on the ground between their paws. Only the heads and shoulders of the dragons are represented. Standing directly upon the heads of the dragons are miniature statuettes of ecclesiastical personages whose heads are missing. With arms extended they support the scroll end of the large leaves upon which the angels are sitting. These little figures wear the tunic, chasuble, and pallium, and carry a maniple over the left arm. Cut in bold characters in mediaeval Latin across the leaves of the open books are the names of Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, and Saint Gregory respectively.

This curious base was once a part of the collection of Sigismond Bardac.² Its career previously must have been somewhat trying, as attested by the broken books, a mended wing, and the absence of heads on the statuettes. The broken wings and books, however, are easily explained by a fall. A similar accident might also account for the decapitation of at least one or two of the figures, yet the uniformity of the break in all three invites a suggestion of iconoclasm. That it did not pass into

the melting-pot of the princes of a later age, because they had no taste for the "barbarous and gothic" works of their forefathers, is indeed gratifying; for, despite its abuse, this little bronze, valuable as a document of mediaeval workmanship, is intrinsically delightful and entertaining, not only in the ingenuity, but in the pure beauty of its design.

The bronze is clearly evolved in type from the candlestick base. There are extant contemporary examples of candlestick bases¹ showing that in the twelfth century a special type was in vogue, usually tripedal in form, having for supports a dragon, a lion's paw, or an eagle's claw, with an interlacing of grotesque figure, floral, and geometrical motifs.² In Germany and in parts of northern France there was a fondness for this type, and it is to these regions we must go to seek the origin of our bronze.

A first glance, however, shows that in this bronze the Teutonic qualities of grotesqueness and weight are absent. The remarkable skill with which the elements of the design are grouped might easily be credited to a German *schmelzwerker*, for some of the finest pieces of metalwork were produced in Germany at this time. On the other hand, the simplicity and dignity, almost classical in spirit, which pervade this work, place it in another class, namely, in a group of works executed about the middle of the twelfth century in the valley of the Meuse.

The dominant figure of this school or group of artisans was a certain Godefroid de Claire, a Walloon goldsmith, citizen of Huy on the Meuse. He was dubbed a "noble," and was referred to as "second to none of his time in goldsmith's work."³

¹For illustrations the following may be conveniently consulted: Ch. Rohault de Fleury, vol. XI, Plates CDXLVIII, CDLI, CDLII, CDLIV, and Annales Archéologiques, vol. X, p. 141; vol. XVIII, p. 162.

²Annales Archéologiques, Didron, vol. XVIII, p. 162.

³H. P. Mitchell in the Burlington Magazine, March, 1919, p. 85, sums up ably what is known of Godefroid de Claire. In footnote No. 3 are given the authorities for the life of Godefroid de Claire. See also author's articles in Burlington

¹Acc. No. 19.106, Rogers Fund, 1919. Width, 5½ inches; Height, 3¾ inches.

²Collection Sigismond Bardac. Notices par Henri Leman, Paris, 1913, No. 34.

Though a layman, he was made, during the last years of his life, a canon in the Augustinian order at Neufnoster. He corresponded in Latin with the famous Wibald, abbot of Stavelot, and made for the latter certain specified works. These facts indicate that he must have held a high place in his art, and was a man of no small calibre.

A study of the pieces generally accepted as either his or belonging to his followers, reveals certain definite qualities, many of which our bronze possesses. The type of head is related to that of the supporting

the forearm and wrist. This appears in the shrine of Saint Heribert at Deutz, in the pedestal of the Abbey of Saint Bertin, in the reliquary of Saints Gondolfus and Candidus in Brussels,¹ and again in a small figure, *The Sea*, in the Victoria and Albert Museum.² Considered as a whole, the dignity of the design and the treatment of the human figure place our bronze unmistakably in Godefroid's school.

The manner in which the tooling is done bespeaks a weaker craftsman than one would expect in Godefroid de Claire,



BASE OF AN ALTAR CROSS OR RELIQUARY
SCHOOL OF GODEFROID DE CLAIRE, XII CENTURY

figures of the Stavelot portable altar in the Brussels Museum.¹ The curious triangular fold in that part of the angel's tunic which falls over the knees, is repeated in the garment which girds the loins of the bronze Christ on the altar cross in the Victoria and Albert Museum.² Another peculiar mannerism of Godefroid's school, repeated in many works, is the formal disk-like treatment of the folds in the sleeves which cover

Magazine, August, 1918, p. 59, and May, 1919, p. 165.

Deutsche Schmelzarbeiten des Mittelalters by Otto v. Falke and Heinrich Frauberger (1904) contains a discussion of Godefroid de Claire and his school and an excellent series of plates. See also *Histoire Générale des Arts Appliqués à l'Industrie*, E. Molinier, vol. IV, Pt. I, Chap. V.

¹Falke and Frauberger, op. cit., Plate 78.

²Falke and Frauberger, Plate 75.

and eliminates any possibility of assigning the work to him. Mr. Mitchell, in his discussion of the master, observed a variety of style in Godefroid's school. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the author of our bronze rivaling the Rhenish metalworkers in the animated portrayal of the dragon. The large hands of the saintly figures and the slight feeling of coarseness in the faces of the angels are not far from the style of Frederick, the goldsmith of Saint Pantaleon's Abbey of Cologne.

¹Illus. in Falke and Frauberger: Shrine of St. Heribert at Deutz, Plates 82-88; Pedestal from the Abbey of St. Bertin (St. Omer Museum), Plate 116; Reliquary of Sts. Gondolfus and Candidus at Brussels, Plate 80.

²Illus. Burlington Magazine, August, 1918, p. 162.

Yet the wig-like crop of hair is very close to the work of the artisans in Godefroid's following. The ease with which the little figures support the immense leaves, trampling down with their small feet the great ears of the monsters, produces a delightful touch. Their task, though a heavy one, makes them so much more an organic part of the scheme. The angels, contrary to our first impression, are not merely staring, but are very anxious that we read their books, and have, in fact, turned them upside down so that we may have no trouble in recognizing the names of the Latin fathers. The beasts themselves are ominous and sullen. Only the weight of their burden restrains their pent-up ferocity. Thus the bronze, related in a few details to Rhenish work, is, on the other hand, conceived thoroughly in the spirit which makes the supporting figures of the altar at Brussels or the evangelists in the Saint Omer pedestal, or even the little figure of The Sea in the Victoria and Albert Museum so interesting.

As to the use and significance of our bronze, much can be conjectured. One point, however, seems to be a certainty. It is not, as the catalogue of the Bardac Collection states, a candlestick base. Its apparent resemblance to the candlestick base, from which it was evolved, perhaps suggested the idea. The instances are very rare where the messengers of the Eternal—for these must be Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael—and saintly men who are honored with a pallium, are condemned to the irksome task of supporting a candle. This point can not be emphasized too strongly; for in the Middle Ages the artist, be he layman or monk, painter, metalworker, or weaver, wrote always in the sacred hieroglyphics of the Church. Here the three messengers are perhaps "seated at the foot of the cross, placed there to attest that the Crucified has not ceased to be the Lord of the universe, whose immutable decrees they are ready to execute." That this bronze was not intended for a candlestick is further demonstrated by its close similarity to another bronze of the same period, executed, perhaps, slightly later; namely, an altar cross form-

erly in the Soltykoff Collection and now in the South Kensington Museum.¹

In general form this crucifix is held to be typical of the twelfth-century altar or reliquary cross,² allowing, of course, for variations in the representation of the cross itself and the treatment and enameling of surfaces. At the foot of the cross are the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, each holding a medallion upon which is inscribed the holder's name. The angels, like those of our own bronze, are seated on the same conventionalized leaves, which terminate likewise in scrolls. Their wings also touch in the same manner. But in the South Kensington bronze, huge lions' paws replace the dragons and statuettes.

The closeness of type, however, is sufficient to establish the significance of our bronze, and that it supported either an altar cross which contained perhaps a fragment of the true cross, or, and this leads to another channel of inquiry, that it might have been part of a reliquary of Saint Ambrose. Again, it is almost impossible to believe that Saint Ambrose should be missing from the group of Latin fathers, were not some allusion to his identity accounted for in the missing portion of the bronze. The very fact that the ecclesiastics wear the pallium is in itself significant, but again difficult of explanation. The pallium is an ensign of jurisdiction worn by the Sovereign Pontiff and granted by him to patriarchs, primates, and metropolitans, and sometimes as a mark of honor to bishops. It does not appear in this period to be an ornament of the Doctors of the Church. However, in later devotional pictures, Saint Ambrose, for example, wears the pallium with mitre and crozier as bishop, though he was neither bishop nor cardinal, but a simple priest.

It is conceivable, then, that the three little figures stand for the Doctors whose names appear above them. The artisan,

¹South Kensington Museum, No. 7938 '62. See Labarte, *Handbook of the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, pages 18 and 41, fig. 14. Engraved in *Annales Archéologiques*, vol. 3, p. 557.

²The Cross in Tradition and History, Seymour, p. 209.

working under ecclesiastical guidance, represented them with the usual symbolism of his epoch in their saintly character. The difficulty confronted in attempting to establish the fact that Saint Ambrose appeared on the absent portion which the base supported, lies in the paucity of contemporary examples of this type. In a later period we find examples of reliquaries containing a statuette of the revered saint, but none in the twelfth century. It is with reluctance that we reconcile ourselves to the absence of the fourth great Latin father. There surely is a reason for his absence, as much as there is for the presence of the dragons whom the Doctors trample under foot. The dragons are there to symbolize the conflict between the Christian Church and the Evil Spirit, a favorite subject in all periods; for Satan in Revelations is described as the Great Dragon.

Whatever was placed above the bronze base was used in processions as well as on the altar, as evidenced by the cutting of the central ring or stem. The cross, if such it were, when used in the celebration of the Mass, was taken from the staff and fitted into the groove of the ring. In the early days of the Church, processional crosses were placed beside or fastened to the altar during the Mass, and later, the altar cross and processional cross being identical, bases such as ours were designed expressly to receive them.

Whether cross or reliquary, it still remains a very beautiful example of twelfth-century metalwork, and brings to us from the Middle Ages a great truth which makes anything of its kind so valuable in a modern museum. Though cast and cut by only

an ordinary craftsman, it is, on the other hand, very remarkable in design and in certain technical qualities. In those days, artistic productions were evolved in a truly rational manner. What one man gained by experience, his pupil received as a heritage, and, thus equipped, the latter advanced his art, again to bequeath to his followers the legacy he enriched and enlarged. The *aurifex*, implying a worker in gold, was then the caster, chaser, gilder, and enamer, and above all the designer. The famous *Schedula* of Theophilus illustrates remarkably well that he knew not only every aspect of metalwork, even to the smallest detail, but must have been himself a consummate artist, who used and wrote about the methods that were evolved by the Romans and Greeks centuries before.

A metalworker today is very much like a ship without a rudder. The heritage of the past is one that he must set out and deliberately seek and strive for—it is not handed over to him, and he does not assimilate it unconsciously as did his mediaeval predecessors. To acquire the technical excellence of a mediaeval or Renaissance craftsman is today a painful process which only the few extraordinary survive. What a boy learned then in the shop of his master requires today many times the effort to achieve. Yet it is all inevitable. The unity brought about by a universality of thought and idea, and perfect craftsmanship coupled with artistic skill, does not yet seem possible. It is with a mingling of regret and inspiration that we admire our little bronze.

G. E. P., JR.